DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 297 357 CS 211 426

AUTHOR Robson, Andrew E.
TITLE The Content of Composition Courses.
PUB DATE [88]
NOTE 20p.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *College English; *Course Content; *Course Objectives; Educational Philosophy; *English Departments; *Freshman Composition; Higher Education; Literature; Test Results; Writing Across the Curriculum; *Writing Skills
IDENTIFIERS English Teachers

ABSTRACT

The battle over whether literature or composition should dominate English instruction is the consequence of a perception that composition instructors who do not use literature as their primary source material have nothing substantial to offer in its place. A survey of 19 colleges and universities in New York revealed that institutions with a majority of students scoring above 500 on the verbal SAT prefer to use literature in freshman composition, while those whose students on average score below 500 prefer other approaches, generally emphasizing basic writing skills. Only two of the respondents indicated that the use of literature in freshman composition was controversial. Although findings suggest that college composition could become central to the production of graduates who can not only read and write but also know something about the world, focusing on literature as a vehicle for composition misses the fact that using literature in this way is not always appropriate. An opportunity exists for college composition courses to develop writing and reading skills while offering a unique overview of the realities of the world-at-large, a truly across-the-curriculum notion. (RS)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED297357

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Andrew Robson

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

The Content of Composition Courses

by Andrew E. Robson

Utica College of Syracuse University, Utica, NY 13502

Recent discussion of the state of English teaching in U.S. colleges and universities is peppered with references to fractious collegial relations. Myron Tuman refers to "strains within college English today" (Tuman 347), while Michael Hoffman makes reference to "a class struggle in the profession" (qtd. in Heller 16). These strains and struggles are the result of the latest shifts in the world of English teaching which, over the past hundred years or so, has seen rhetoric lose its place on center state to literature, which now is herself being jostled and bumped by upstart composition. The consequence of this latest change has been described as the "lit-comp street fight" (Heller 16) and has been described in less dramatic but more philosophical terms by Jay Robinson, who concludes that "In our present world, privileged definitions of literature, of reading and of writing, will serve neither students nor the world of ideas" (Robinson 489).

CS211436

These references to "class struggle" and "privileged definitions" are significant because they suggest that the root of the problem lies in differing perceptions of what it means to be a teacher of English. The self-image of English teachers is conditioned in part by their own academic (usually literary) background, and in part by their perceptions of their students' abilities. The class differences referred to earlier may be described as involving "idealists" and "pragmatists." For "idealists", teaching English means teaching literature, and their self-image and image of academic life may be tainted by association with students, courses, and (may it be said?) colleagues involved in English teaching which is not the teaching of literature. For "pragmatists", teaching English may mean teaching different things, depending on the background, ability, and objectives of the students. For these teachers, while teaching literature is often pleasurable, it may not address the real shortcomings of many students in reading and writing.

The fact that students in U.S. colleges and universities cover a wide spectrum in ability and background is reflected in the nature of instruction in English

departments. This paper is in part intended to present the results of a survey of English departments in New York state, to see how the lit-comp street fight is progressing and to see if the use of literature in freshman composition courses is related to the academic ability of students. A second purpose of this paper is to offer thoughts on the content of composition courses in a way that advances Robinson's notion that "We need to talk not about 'composition' and 'literature', but about talking and listening and reading and writing as centrally human and humanizing activities" (Robinson 492).

The New York Survey

Questionnaires were sent to forty-four colleges and universities in New York state. Replies were received from nineteen. Of these respondents, only two declared that the use of literature in freshman composition classes was controversial within the English department. Of those respondents which stated that the use of literature was not controversial, eight noted that "Individual instructors select their own materials and the issue isn't discussed". Interestingly, others who stated that the issue was not

controversial nevertheless indicated that the question of what was appropriate subject matter in freshman composition had been decided after some debate. For example, one respondent, from an institution that favored the use of literature in composition courses, stated that "The course is a pre-requisite for the introduction to literature course; students need more challenging materials"; another stated that the question was not controversial because literature was considered "Inappropriate"; still another stated that ten people within the department favored the use of literature, while two did not. The responses suggest that the question may not be discussed within many departments either because policy has now been established or because the matter is entirely up to the discretion of the instructors; however, there is considerable variation in policy and practice among the institutions surveyed, and the question was one which elicited strong comments from several respondents, some strongly in favor and some strongly against the use of literature in freshman composition classes.

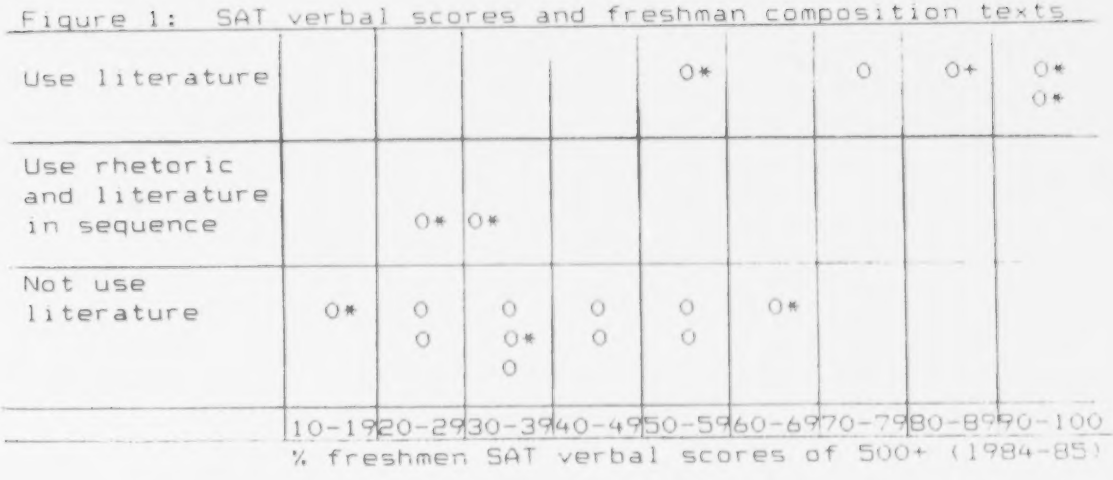
The use of literature within the institutions surveyed followed an interesting pattern, with five having official

departmental or institutional policies requiring the use of literature in their freshman composition sequence and three having official policies against. This imbalance was reversed, however, when institutions which had no official policy were taken into account. These institutions tended to use rhetorics or other non-literary texts in their freshman composition courses. Overall, five institutions generally used literary anthologies or a variety of literary texts, eleven generally used rhetorics or other non-literary texts or approaches, and two had two-part sequences that involved the use of non-literary texts for the first part and literary texts for the second part. One institution had eliminated freshman composition from the curriculum.

The reasons why some institutions emphasize the use of literature while others specifically reject this approach may in part include the personal preferences of instructors or departmental chairpersons, but it is suggested here that these personal preferences may be strongly influenced by the academic quality of the student body in each institution. When the responses to the questionnaire were compared with the verbal SAT scores of the incoming freshmen at each college, an interesting pattern emerged. Figure 1

illustrates this pattern, with each circle representing one institution:

Figure 1: SAT verbal scores and freshman composition texts



* indicates official college/departmental policy
\+ indicates use of essay as literature
0 indicates one NY college or university

The pattern revealed in Figure 1 suggests that institutions with a majority of students scoring above 500 on the verbal SAT's prefer to use literature, while those whose students on average score below 500 prefer other approaches, generally emphasizing basic writing skills. Such a pattern helps explain, perhaps, the idea that there is a "class war" going on in the world of college English teaching.

The Content of Composition Courses

Criticisms of the place of composition in the academic curriculum are frequently couched in terms suggesting that the subject has little academic merit and that it is a subject that does not belong at college. With these kinds of statements being made, it is easy to understand why there are "lit-comp street fights" and a "class war" among faculty. The accusation is serious, and the assumptions that underlie it need careful consideration. Familiarity with these arguments suggests that these assumptions may be generalized. They are variations on the same theme, but they focus on students, courses, and faculty in turn:

1. Students who are incompetent in writing and reading have no place in college.

2. Basic writing skills belong in elementary and high schools, not in college.

3. So many students write so poorly that composition classes must be pitched at a miserably low level, unworthy of college work.

4. Because composition classes deal with problems on such a basic level, composition instructors and professors are not engaged in teaching a truly academic

subject and their status is therefore questionable.

Clearly, these assumptions cannot be left unchallenged by those who believe that composition has a place in college. The most telling answer is the pragmatic one: many students can't write and read very well, and so instruction is necessary. It is possible to agree that all college students should enter college with a reasonable mastery of the English language, but when this isn't so, and when some of those for whom this isn't so are from sections of the national community deemed on a political and legal level to be deserving of special academic consideration and help, the import of Robinson's argument about 'privileged notions of literacy' becomes particularly apparent. It is of interest in this regard that the colleges in the New York survey described in this paper that emphasize the study of literature rather than the study of rhetoric and other non-literary subject matter tend to be those that have academically superior students. This can be defended on pragmatic grounds also: if these students write well, they don't need instruction in this area.

Looked at another way, such colleges might be said,

without being pejorative, to be "privileged" in that they deal with the cream of the crop academically. What is right for them is not necessarily right for colleges which take less competent students. For faculty who themselves belong in this academic elite, this may be hard to accept. It is natural to feel that one's academic pride is impugned somewhat by students who can't read very well, can't write very well, and who don't know much about anything outside the worlds of commercial television and the shopping mall. To protect their pride, however, these professors would either have to find employment in an academically superior college, or find employment in a different field, because the fact is that the relatively open admissions policies that are widespread in the United States mean that, unlike in some countries, the national student body is not restricted to an elite group of academically talented people; it contains many more very ordinary students than very talented ones.

Even while accepting the need for writing instruction in most colleges, there remains a need for serious and critical consideration of the <u>content</u> of composition courses. It is possible to believe that there is a real,

however lamentable, need for composition instruction at the college level, while questioning the value of what is currently taught in these classes. The question, therefore, becomes twofold:

1. Is it appropriate to teach composition at college level?

2. If it is pragmatically justified to teach composition in college, what kind of course should it be?

In the New York survey reported in this paper, many respondents volunteered comments on the content of the composition courses. Most of these comments came from respondents who currently use literature, or would like to. These comments are presented below; the figures in parentheses give the percentage of freshmen at the respondent's college or university scoring 500 or more on the verbal SAT examinations, reported in Peterson's 1985 survey.

"I do not think that writing can be taught effectively without the use of literary (and other) texts." (77%)

"Literature is very appropriate. Students need and

like the challenge: it prepares students for advanced courses." (57%)

"Literature is appropriate as long as instructors keep focus on composition, too." (58%)

"The general thinking is that the course should prepare students for 'writing across the curriculum' and should not be totally focused on literature." (28%)

"Development of writing skills is the objective. Readings are not analyzed as literature." (36%)

"We consider it essential to use literature as the primary subject matter in freshman composition classes." (91%)

"No one in our department uses literature as a primary subject matter." (42%)

"Opposed to the use of literature: Students get the message that writing is important mainly for English courses." (38%)

"Literature is inappropriate."(43%)

One respondent commented that his/her college did not use literature and that "the course is officially devoid of any substance at all - the Greek Sophists would love it." This respondent noted that literature would "give the students something to write about." (17%)

These sample comments provide further illustration of the wide range of opinion and practice within and between English departments, and also serve to introduce the idea that the content of composition classes is the real source of much of the controversy. Composition is essentially a subject without an agreed content. This is especially so if we leave out the formal study of grammar, as happens in many courses and texts. The current fashion is to teach the process of writing, but this does not in itself provide composition courses with any content. In this situation, instructors usually make use of literature or anthologies of essays to generate subject matter, or, especially with weaker students, use fairly random topics relating to the personal experience of students. The last person quoted

above is not alone in feeling that many composition courses lack useful content, and that literature gives, or would give, students something of value to write about.

A recent study by Polin and White notes a wide range of approaches used in composition courses in the California State University system. These findings are similar to those reported here in the New York survey. Polin and White find more diversity within the field of freshman composition than between freshman composition and remedial and other lower level composition courses (Polin and White 30). This situation may be seen as revealing either a rich variety of pedagogical approaches or floundering disarray.

The great strength of the literature approach is its apparent coherence in terms of content; its weakness is its lack of direct focus on writing skills - a major consideration for weaker students. The great weakness of the rhetoric/workshop approaches is their apparent lack of coherent and rigorous content. This not to say that these approaches lack a conceptual framework; clearly, rhetorical modes, the writing process, and language structures each offer a framework for instruction. Of these three

frameworks, however, only the last requires, or even suggests, specific factual content upon which most instructors might agree. Typically, sentence structures and grammar form a significant part of only remedial and lower level courses; it is in the mainstream of freshman composition where the conceptual problem lies.

Current composition texts fall into two basic groups: the anthologies of readings organized along rhetorical lines and the manuals/workbooks which emphasize the process of writing, using a random selection of topics to write about. The anthologies are remarkably predictable in format and, often, in authors and essays selected. The essays, albeit interesting to many instructors, are usually pitched at a level of debate which assumes familiarity with topics of political and social interest and adequate ability to read such material with understanding. Each of these assumptions is frequently misplaced. Perhaps more importantly, such anthologies offer virtually no coherent factual body of knowledge; the essays are chosen because they more or less exemplify certain rhetorical modes and patterns of organization. Sometimes, the essays are also grouped thematically, but they are not selected because they

actually teach anything or provide information in any organized way. The word 'patterns' frequently occurs in the title of such books. The underlying assumption seems to be that it doesn't matter what students write about so long as they write. It is time this notion was challenged.

If content is rarely important is the rhetorical approach, it is even less so in the composition texts that focus almost entirely on mechanics and the process of writing; these texts are almost entirely devoid of information and ideas and are heavily dependent on instructors to enliven the proceedings by selecting topics that students might be interested in writing about. One proposed text recently gave virtually no consideration to what students should write about, but insisted that the writing process required twenty-one steps before completion of an assignment. With ideas like this circulating, urgent intervention is necessary before students expire from terminal boredom. Many instructors make extensive use of the personal experience of students in order to generate writing - another example of random content of no intellectual value or rigor being utilized as a vehicle for student writing. Instead of accepting the notion that it

doesn't matter what students write about so long as they write, it might be of value to assert that as long as students have to write about something, they might as well write about something enlightening; in some colleges this might be something fairly traditional - literature, for example - but in others it might be something innovative, taking advantage of the great opportunity presented by the lack of coherent content in much of composition teaching. Present writing-across-the-curriculum texts go some way toward this goal, but usually focus on a few issues rather than presenting a coherent body of knowledge.

The opportunity for innovation and re-thinking in the area of composition teaching coincides with a widespread perception that students are chronically deficient in general knowledge. In an interdependent world, our students have no world view, no awareness of the ordinary realities in the world around them. Into the intellectual void that characterizes much of college composition teaching could be injected a variety of enriching, informative materials that actually teach students something about the world while they are learning to improve their writing skills. The twin goals of this approach are important: the improvement of

writing through instruction and practice in organization, process, and mechanical skills; and the cultivation of mature world views through the presentation of information which should be familiar to all people who claim to be educated. It is preposterous that American students should graduate in abject ignorance of fundamental geographical, historical and political realities, and these realities, along with others that contribute to the building of a view of the world that bears some resemblance to the real thing, could be presented in the context of college composition classes and could contribute in a unique way to the general education of the students. Hirsch, it might be added, endorses the idea that "'world knowledge' is essential to the development of reading and writing skills" (Hirsch 2).

The "class war" in college English, and the "lit-comp street fight" referred to earlier are the consequences of a perception that composition instructors who do not use literature as their primary subject matter or source material do not offer anything substantial in its place. This perception, however unfair in individual cases, is easy to understand when one looks at the types of composition texts mentioned earlier. To focus on the merits of

literature as a vehicle for composition teaching misses, however, the fact that using literature in this way is not always appropriate and that other possibilities exist. In particular, an opportunity exists for college composition to become central and genuinely important within the college curriculum by developing writing (and reading) skills while offering a unique overview of realities in the world-at-large, a truly across-the-curriculum notion. College composition, in a word, could become central to the production of graduates who can not only read and write, but who also know something about the world - graduates who are literate both in the conventional sense and in the sense popularized by Hirsch.

Works Cited

Heller, Scott. "Literature Scholars Struggle to Find New Ways to Instruct the English Professors of Tomorrow." The Chronicle of Higher Education. April 15, 1987:15-17.

Hirsch, E.D., Jr. Cultural Literacy - What Every American Needs to Know. Houghton Mifflin, Boston: 1987.

Polin, Linda, and Edward White. "Patterns of Composition Instruction." WPA: Writing Program Administration. Vol. 8, No. 3, Spring, 1985: 25-33.

Robinson, Jay. "Literacy in the Department of English." College English. Vol. 47, No. 5, Sept. 1985: 482-498.

Tuman, Myron. "From Astor Place to Kenyon Road: The NCTE and the Origins of English Studies." College English. Vol. 48, No. 4, April 1986: 339-349.

Acknowledgement: The author thanks the Utica College Small Grants Committee for its support.